DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 365 962 CS 011 557

AUTHOR	Sipe, Rebecca Bowers
TITLE	Strategies for Poor Spellers.
INSTITUTION	National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandria, VA.
REPORT NO	ISSN-075-0031
PUB DATE	Feb 94
NOTE	5p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314-3483 ($2.50 for a single copy).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT	Here's How; v12 n4 Feb 1994
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Administrator Role; Elementary Education; Learning Strategies; Parent Participation; Principals; *Spelling; *Spelling Instruction; *Teaching Methods; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS	Spelling Growth; Spelling Patterns

ABSTRACT

A number of spelling strategies are available to help students who do not have a good visual memory. Phonics is a valuable tool in the early grades. Many students benefit from studying word families. Mnemonic devices and tactile methods are also useful. Spelling gains importance when students write, although both the purpose for writing and the audience must be considered. The dilemma for principals is how to provide appropriate guidance and support for teachers. The following research-based practices may prove helpful: (1) recognize that spelling is a writing skill; (2) remember that spelling is a developmental process; (3) use developmentally appropriate practices; (4) insist on correct spelling of words that have been studied; (5) concentrate on high-frequency words; (6) make a distinction between vocabulary words and spelling words; (7) focus instruction on time-tested strategies; (8) encourage students to use personal word lists; (9) emphasize word study; (10) encourage parent participation; (11) immerse students in literacy activities; and (12) teach spelling, do not just test it. (Five commonly asked questions and their answers are included.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 365 962

VOLUME 12, NUMBER 4 FEBRUARY 1994

HERE'S HOW

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Strategies for Poor Spellers

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Rebecca Bowers Sipe

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

W. T. Greenleaf

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Having a piece of spinach stuck between your teeth isn't a big deal—until you open your mouth to smile. Poor spelling is a little like that—it isn't much of a problem until you put words on paper. But for many principals, spelling can be that "piece of spinach" that mars an otherwise exemplary instructional program.

Few curricular issues elicit as much concern from parents as faulty spelling. All too often the principal is caught in a cross-fire between parents and teachers when student spelling performance comes under scrutiny, especially in schools that boast progressive language arts programs.

According to one estimate, between 15 and 20 percent of Americans are poor spellers (Kelly 1992). Unfortunately, most poor spellers go through life assuming that their inability to spell also makes them poor writers. We see this attitude reflected in schools across the nation, with children frequently restricting their writing to simple words they can readily spell.

Contrary to Benjamin Franklin's suggestion that "an educated man should be able to spell any word at least six ways," we are a nation obsessed with correctness in spelling. Schools and businesses have been known to turn down prospective employees because of misspellings on letters and resumes. Writers need to be understood by their readers, and misspelled words are a source of distraction and irritation. It is important that schools provide effective strategies for students with chronic spelling problems to save them from a lifetime of inhibition about their writing abilities.

Children blessed with strong visual memory learn to spell with little effort or stress. But for others, spelling tests are sources of high anxiety, sweaty palms, and upset stomachs. They feel inferior because they are not as "smart" as the good spellers.

Spelling Strategies

There are a number of strategies available to help students who are not blessed with great visual memory. The most basic of these is to provide poor spellers with dictionaries and teach them how to look up words. Word processors not only enable writers to easily revise their work, but also check for spelling errors.

Because different strategies work for different learners, a wide assortment is necessary. *Phonics*—sounding out words—is a valuable tool in the early grades, although less so as a child's vocabulary becomes more sophisticated and begins to include words that often don't fit the traditional phonetic structure, or are not spelled the way they sound (Gentry 1981).

Many students benefit from studying *word families*. When studying the word *honor*, for example, students also discuss *honorable*, *honoring*, *honored*, and *honorary*, adding five new and correctly spelled words to their written repertoire. Successful teachers frequently cover their walls with word families, surrounding their students with language and encouraging frequent ex-

Rebecca Bowers Sipe is coordinator for language arts for the Anchorage School District in Alaska.

CS011457

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

perimentation with these words in everyday writing assignments.

Mnemonic devices (from Mneumos, the Greek god of memory) often help students with the spelling of difficult words. I had to look up the word *accommodate* every time I wrote it until someone suggested that I remember "to *accommodate* the twins." Using this device, I now correctly double both consonants every time I write the word. Teachers who encourage students to create silly pictures or jingles for confusing words make spelling less threatening and more fun.

Some learners must rely on *tactile methods*. I have observed a child who experiences success by writing words in his left palm with his right index finger. He says that it helps him to later remember the "feel" of a word that he wants to write.

Spelling as a Writing Skill

Spelling gains importance when we write, although both the purpose for writing and the audience must be considered. Spelling in a personal diary obviously presents few concerns, and we don't worry about perfection when writing to close friends. However, correctness becomes an issue when writing in a more formal mode. Students need opportunities to write for a variety of audiences to sense the differences in requirements (Moffett and Wagner 1992).

PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY

This article is in support of the following standards from *Quality Elementary and Middle Schools* (NAESP 1990) and *Quality Programs for Young Children: Early Childhood Education* (NAESP 1990):

Curriculum. The curriculum includes experiences that provide children with basic skills necessary to function effectively in a global society.

The teacher uses varied teaching strategies, depending on the developmental levels of the children.

While students need opportunities to explore the writing process that works best for them, they also need the reassurance of knowing that even published authors do not write perfect first drafts. When I am writing for a critical audience, I call on trusted colleagues to proofread my last draft. Student writers may similarly rely on peer review groups, conferences with a teacher-editor, or help from a friend or family member. Only when the piece of writing takes its final form does spelling become significant. The more important the work, the higher the value on its correctness.

What Principals Can Do

The dilemma for principals is how to provide appropriate guidance and support for teachers who want to help poor spellers but do not want to arrest their development as writers. The following successful, research-based practices may prove helpful:

• *Recognize that spelling is a writing skill* that must be addressed as part of the writing process. Good writing often takes multiple revisions, and spelling matters only in the final draft. Show young writers the array of tools and strategies available to assist in correcting final drafts.

• *Remember that spelling is a developmental process.* Preschoolers begin to experiment with language in print the same way that they learn to talk, by connecting sounds and letters. In the early writing stage, the letters don't necessarily relate to the meaning intended, which can be equated with "babbling" in print. By the end of grade one or early in grade two, most children are ready to begin using strategies that will lead them to correct spelling. Formal spelling programs may be of most benefit during this stage (Gentry 1981).

• *Use developmentally appropriate practices* such as invented (temporary) spelling. As children become fluent in written language, encourage them to capture their thoughts first and worry about correctness afterward. In early drafts, writers may "invent" spelling for words they don't know, in effect holding places open until they have time to supply the correct words in the final draft.

Students' vocabulary should never be limited to words they can spell. Instead, encourage them to use invented spelling and to circle the words of which they are uncertain. But students should understand that correct spelling speeds up the writing process by freeing the writer to concentrate on meaning.

• *Insist on correct spelling of words that have been studied.* Too often, words that were spelled correctly on Friday's test show up misspelled on Monday's writing assignment. Students need repeated practice to assure long-term retention, and this practice must be in the context of their own writing. While the traditional method of writing each word ten times has no proven effect, using spelling words in original writing correlates to a high degree of retention.

• *Concentrate on high-frequency words* that are relevant to student writing. Lists of such words are easily obtained and form the basis of most commercial spelling programs. As few as 1,000 words constitute 90 percent of everyday writing and 5,000 words account for 99.2 percent (Horn 1926). Although it may be nice for students to be able to spell words like *mezzanine*, it is far more efficient to concentrate on words they will use frequently.

• *Make a distinction between vocabulary words and spelling words.* Vocabulary instruction is important, but vocabulary lists are an inappropriate substitute for the more frequently used spelling words. Students must be able to read and use a word for at least six months before they are required to spell it correctly.

• *Focus instruction on time-tested strategies.* Use a test-study-test method to introduce new words and error analysis to determine the types of errors being made.

In the test-study-test method, students are pretested on a word list before formal study begins. With teacher guidance, they identify misspelled words and write the correct forms in the center column of the paper. For the final test, students write the words in the right-hand column. If a student misses many words, the list may be too difficult.

Error analysis involves examining both correct and incorrect spelling, and attempting to identify patterns of strength and weakness. Instruction may then be adjusted to meet individual needs (Shaughnessy 1979).

• *Encourage students to use personal word lists.* Each week students should identify words they routinely use but have difficulty spelling. These should become part of the student's core words for study that week.

• *Emphasize word study.* Display charts and maps of word families. Look for key words everywhere—in newspapers, on signs, in all types of books—and decorate classroom walls and ceilings with them.

• *Encourage parent participation.* Give parents suggestions for home activities that can help students learn to spell by keeping journals, writing notes or letters, playing word games, and rehearsing the next day's spelling words. Most commercial spelling programs have parent involvement packets.

• *Immerse students in literacy activities.* Students need to see words, talk about words, write words, and play with words. Immersing students in any of these activities supports all phases of literacy.

• *Teach spelling, don't just test it.* Spelling instruction has too often been

Common Questions about Spelling

Why doesn't the teacher correct spelling?

Children learn to read and write the same way they learn to talk, and teachers encourage children to have confidence in their writing by concentrating on the message they are trying to convey rather than the correctness of the spelling.

As children gain confidence in writing, they are taught that correct spelling and the conventions of language are important. Teachers let children know that while they need not be concerned about correctness in their rough drafts, they should strive to make their published pieces error-free.

By encouraging students to edit their own work as much as possible, the teacher builds independence and responsibility. Although the teacher may need to assist in fixing things a child may have missed, it is critical that children understand that everyone makes mistakes, and that the only thing worse than making a mistake is being afraid to try (Mathews 1992).

How do you teach spelling?

This is a thorny question, particularly for teachers who choose to abandon the traditional spelling lists in favor of integrating spelling with other instruction.

One second grade teacher, who eliminated weekly spelling tests in favor of a multifaceted spelling strategy, uses word banks, picture dictionaries and thesauruses, printed resources, a word wall, spelling rules, writing words three different ways (to see which appears to be correct), slow articulation ("stretching") of some words, diagnostic observation of student writing, and modeling (Bartch 1992).

Do you need spelling books?

As we move toward integrating the language arts, the need for separate books for handwriting, grammar, and spelling will decrease. But a school should have a few copies as reference tools and as security blankets for teachers who need reassurance that they are not leaving anything out.

How do you grade?

Letter grading on traditional report cards is ill-matched to the developmental child-centered learning in today's classrooms. Teachers who celebrate children's progress through the stages of writing are loathe to assign a "D" to a child who has progressed but still performs below grade level.

Teachers who integrate instruction find it hard to isolate grades for each area of the language arts—handwriting, composition, response to literature, mechanics, and spelling. If letter grades are to be administered, Woodley and Woodley (1989) suggest holistic scores of 5 to 1, based on the degree to which students have completed tasks, their effectiveness in expressing themselves, and any demonstrated growth or development in writing or reading. The numbers can then be converted to letter grades.

Many schools and districts are replacing letter grades on report cards with behavioral listings, such as "Takes risks when reading," with teachers checking off "frequently," "sometimes," or "rarely."

Marguerite C. Radencich
Reading Supervisor
Dade County Public Schools
Miami, Florida

References

Bartch, J. "An Alternative to Spelling: An Integrated Approach." *Language Arts* 69 (October 1992): 404-408.

Mathews, J. "Here's Why Words Were Misspelled in Kids' Letters." *Orlando Sentinel* (July 2, 1992): A-19.

Woodley, J. and Woodley, C. "Whole Language, Texas Style." In K. Goodman, Y. Goodman, and W. Hood (eds.), *The Whole Language Evaluation Book*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1989.

equated with busy work. It must be integrated into all classroom activities and tied closely to the writing program.

We must let students know spelling skill has nothing to do with intelligence, and that being a poor speller does not condemn one to being a poor writer any more than being a good speller guarantees that one will be a good writer. There are lots of strategies to help poor spellers. They shouldn't let that "piece of spinach" spoil their smiles. □

References

Gentry, R. J. "Learning to Spell Developmentally." *The Reading Teacher* (January 1981): 378-381.

Horn, E. *A Basic Writing Vocabulary*. Iowa City, Ia.: University of Iowa Monographs in Education, First Series, No. 4, 1926.

Moffett, J. and Wagner, B. J. *Student-Centered Language Arts, K-12*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1992.

Shaughnessy, M. P. *Spelling: Errors and Expectations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Weber, W. R. and Henderson, E. H. "A Computer-based Program of Word Study: Effects on Reading and Writing." *Reading Psychology* 10:2 (1989): 157-171.

Here's How (ISSN 075-0031) is published six times during the school year by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Single copies: $2.50; bulk orders (10 or more): $2.00 each. Virginia residents add 4.5% sales tax. Specify date and title of issue when ordering. Checks payable to NAESP must accompany order. Send to Educational Products, NAESP, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314-3483.

ON CALL FOR KIDS—AGAIN!

The National Principals' Hotline, NAESP's toll-free phone service manned by 150 principals at our annual convention, will be up and running for its fifth year at the following times:

Sunday, March 6—11:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.
Monday, March 7—7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.
Tuesday, March 8—7:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.
(Eastern Time)

Tell parents and your community to call us at **1-800-944-1601** with their questions on education and children.

The Hotline, a public service from NAESP and the volunteer efforts of its members, is made possible by NAESP's partners, *Family Circle* magazine and Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association (TIAA).